

## Review

# The Quintessential Zerka

Writings by Zerka Toeman Moreno on Psychodrama, Sociometry and Group Psychotherapy

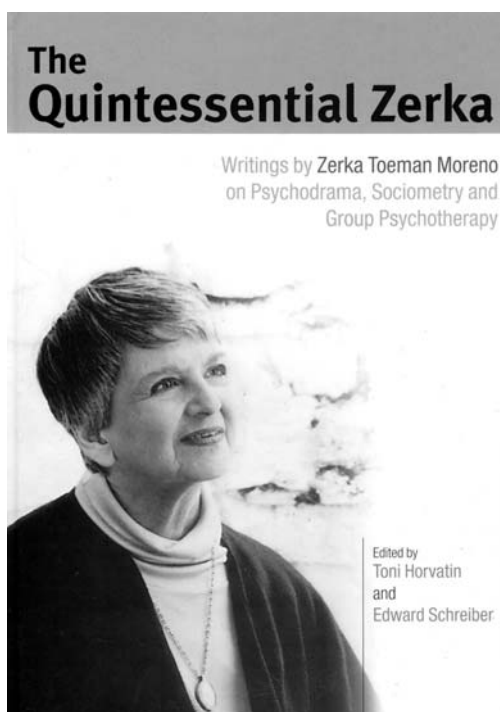
Edited by Toni Horvatin and Edward Schreiber, 2006

### Reviewed by Gillian Rose

Zerka Moreno, who recently celebrated her ninetieth birthday, needs no introduction to anyone with more than a cursory familiarity with psychodrama. It is timely that this book, bringing together some of her considerable writings regarding the psychodramatic method into a single volume, is finally published. Never far from the mention of Zerka is the spectre of her late husband, psychodrama's founder, Jacob Moreno. It therefore seems fitting that the title of her book, *The Quintessential Zerka*, gives a playful nod to the primer of his writing by Jonathon Fox, *The Essential Moreno*.

The articles in this book are arranged chronologically in five chapters with Dr. Moreno being the pivot: Beginnings 1944 - 1948, Early Pioneers 1949 -1965, Transitions 1966 - 1974, On Her Own 1974 - 1977, and The New Millennium and Beyond 2000 - present. Within these chapters are thirty-six individual pieces, each one prefaced by a present day comment from Zerka. This device works extremely well, providing both a personal touch and a context for the writing that helps to form it into a coherent body of work.

Zerka Toeman met Moreno in 1941 and has been involved in psychodrama ever since - sixty-six years in total, thirty-three of them with Moreno and thirty-three since his death. She was, by her own admission, a "participant actor in one of the major revolutions in social science" (p136). What she doesn't say, but is evident through the scope of the writing and the forward by Dr Dale



Buchanan, is how much she was a co-creator of psychodrama as we know it today. While Moreno was alive, as well as being his wife, Zerka was his secretary, preferred auxiliary-ego, editor, co-author, researcher and director of training amongst other roles. In the thirty years since Moreno's death, it has been Zerka's commitment to refining Moreno's visionary, but at times loosely defined ideas, and her systemization of the training process that has, in large part, ensured psychodrama's continued vibrancy and viability.

The dovetailing of Jacob's and Zerka's abilities into a successful partnership is alluded to in one of Zerka's comments on the early years. "During this time at Beacon the air seemed palpable with Moreno's ideas. He was the creator, he expected others to work out the details. It was a role that came naturally to me because I believed so strongly in his vision" (p. 37). Indeed, the reach and breadth of Moreno's vision is captured in the range of topics Zerka writes about: motion pictures and television, mothers and family life, returned servicemen and their families, and psychotic patients. As Zerka says "everything in our lives was grist for the mill" (p. 43). How their partnership worked is again alluded to in the introductory comment to a 1965 article on 'Psychodramatic Rules, Techniques and Adjunctive Methods'. "Moreno was good at creating ideas but they were not always organised or presented in a lucid manner. I worked at giving some form to them, wanting him to be understood by as large a population as possible .... Moreno had groups of students come to the house in the evening for more free-ranging philosophical/historical discussions. I saw to it that there was an organised part of the training that could be grasped and learnt".

The book is enhanced by a sprinkling throughout of Zerka's poetry. And readers on the lookout for examples of the "bon mots" Zerka is renowned for will not be disappointed. There are such gems as: "Psychodrama is similar to a vaccination: it is a small dose of insanity given under conditions of control" (p.163). Some fascinating facts about Moreno also emerge. Did you know he was used by the media as a predictor of the outcome of boxing matches between 1935 and 1958, using sociometry and "physiodrama" (body movements) to make his assessments?

Throughout the book, but particularly in the early sections, are the "due recognition" articles that seem to inevitably cling to Moreno. 'The Seminal Mind of J.L. Moreno' and 'Evolution and Dynamics of the Group Psychotherapy Movement' are examples of these, although both are also excellent articles in their own right. Zerka prefaces the latter article with the comment that "We weren't interested in turf" (p. 129), to which the "Tui" response comes to mind ("Yeah Right" for our non-New Zealand readers). Within this article Zerka, while attempting to distinguish between inspiration and an organised movement, perhaps unwittingly draws a parallel to her own contribution to psychodrama. She writes "A distinction is made between the idea, and the organisation dedicated to its propagation. Christ was the carrier of the idea but Peter was the founder of the Church of Christianity. Marx was the author of *Das Kapital* but he and Engels became the founders of the communist movement when they organised the "First International". I think it is not too great a stretch to say Moreno conceived of psychodrama, but it was in combination with Zerka Toeman Moreno that it has become an internationally known and respected philosophical and therapeutic movement."

With its wide scope of historically interesting and theoretically stimulating articles, *The Quintessential Zerka* will be a useful, if not essential, reference for any serious student of psychodrama.

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